

Balancing and Assessing

By Michael G. Miller

After doing the “IO thing” for a number of years now, and having been offered the opportunity to “rock the boat” a bit, I wanted to lay out two things that I believe pose a major challenge to the IO community. These topics are separate, but related to some degree; identifying solutions to either one may benefit the other as well.

Challenge One: Incorporating advanced computer-based tools into IO planning and integrative analysis.

There is great pressure on the community to improve the efficiency of IO integrative analysis, planning and assessment processes by harnessing advanced computing tools. In general, I believe that tools can make some jobs easier and help produce a better product. There is, however, a balance that must be attained: we have to balance the integrating of advanced tools that will force changes in business processes with the people’s need to use the existing processes to get the work done. In this regard, the people and the business processes should always drive the technologies to be employed, and not vice-versa. The tools should always serve the master; the master should never serve the tools. After 12 years of direct observation, I am of the opinion that the IO community already has plenty of good, usable tools that help provide IO analysis and planning support to combatant commanders. These tools need to be integrated where appropriate to improve their efficiency; further, a dedicated cadre of personnel needs to be trained to use these analysis and planning tools, and then they need to use them. As this dedicated cadre of tool-smart people is using the tools, we will: find out which tools work well; lash them together properly to improve their performance when appropriate; and see where gaps exist or where things could be improved. As new tools come along, these should be evaluated to

determine their suitability for improving process and product; acquiring new tools for the sake of acquiring new tools should be avoided like the proverbial plague. At bottom, there should be a “productive tension” between keeping existing processes, and acquiring new technologies that would force process revision; if the tension is kept productive (not destructive), the integration of tools into the IO community’s operating culture will be much less painful. The Joint USJFCOM-USSTRATCOM program known as the Virtual Integrated Support to the Information Operations Environment [VISION] must hold to the principles outlined above to build a tool set for the IO analyst-planner that helps produce better planning products more quickly.

Challenge Two: Effects and Actions Assessment.

A great deal of emphasis is being placed on this topic in the IO community now, and for good reason: we in the IO business need to know clearly “how well we’re doing what we intended to do.” The challenge of assessment lies not in establishing the business processes for doing assessment—these exist. The challenge lies in two other areas: the first is that the data to make the assessment meaningful—especially to support the measures of effectiveness calculations—are hard to acquire. The second component of the challenge that seemingly is not well understood is this: when determining how well influence programs—strategic communication, psychological operations and public affairs campaigns especially—are working, there is short-term assessment... and there is long-term assessment.

Commanders are inclined to look at short-term assessment to gauge the success of their efforts; it may be, however, that progress will only be seen over the long term. Failure of the assessment staff to forecast both the short and long-term expected effects of their influence operations does the commander a disservice. This is because the commander may decide, based on incomplete staff analysis, to abandon a perfectly good influence campaign because the effects desired were not forthcoming in the short term. Commanders must realize that the effects desired might only be created over the long term—in many cases, after the commander’s tenure has ended. In the current unpleasant, terrorism-driven (but far more complex) national security environment, the emphasis should be on the longer-term assessments of our progress in creating effects, while simultaneously understanding when the short-term assessment results are harbingers of longer-term problems. Also, assessment is not intelligence gathering; rather, it uses intelligence gathering, as well as information gathering, to craft judgments regarding our progress and how to direct further efforts. Additionally, it takes time to “grow” skilled assessors: though an intelligent person can be trained to do assessment in short order, real assessment expertise comes as a consequence of actually conducting assessment. Finally, there is still the problem of acquiring the data to make a valid assessment: this area, however, is where the tools I discussed in Challenge One can help.

Two challenges... two opportunities... how will we proceed?

-- MGM